

## **Export Odyssey: Taking Local Firms Global**

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Bahadir, S., Cramer, S., & Williamson, N. (2018, July/August). Export Odyssey: Taking Local Firms Global. *BizEd (AACSB International)*, 17(4), 60-61.

<https://bized.aacsb.edu/articles/2018/06/export-odyssey-taking-local-firms-global>

**This post originally appeared on [AACSB Insights](#).**

### **Abstract:**

For the past three decades, companies in Greensboro, North Carolina, that want to export products overseas have had a valuable resource to turn to—students at the University of North Carolina’s Bryan School of Business and Economics. In Export Odyssey, our international marketing course for upper-level undergraduate students, Bryan School students work with local companies to develop plans to export goods to foreign buyers.

**Keywords:** business education | exports | academic librarians

### **Article:**

For the past three decades, companies in Greensboro, North Carolina, that want to export products overseas have had a valuable resource to turn to—students at the University of North Carolina’s Bryan School of Business and Economics. In Export Odyssey, our international marketing course for upper-level undergraduate students, Bryan School students work with local companies to develop plans to export goods to foreign buyers.

Now-retired UNC Greensboro professor Nick Williamson taught the international marketing course from 1983 to 2017, but it wasn’t until 1988 that he added the Export Odyssey project as a course requirement. He did so after overhearing one of his students talking on a pay phone as she negotiated the sale of ladies’ socks produced by a company in Lexington, North Carolina. She was talking to a purchasing agent of a company in Bogotá, Colombia—and applying what she was learning in his marketing class. From then on, all students were asked to attempt to make an overseas sale of a product manufactured in North Carolina.

The course, now taught by assistant professor Suleyman Bahadir, begins with lectures and discussions to introduce students to the nature of exporting from a marketing strategy perspective; they also learn about U.S. export regulations, free trade agreements, and export financing programs. Students then begin their projects, which account for 75 percent of their grades. We ask the teams to identify small to medium-sized North Carolina-based manufacturers that could benefit from an export strategy. Each team conducts research on trade flow and foreign markets and selects one market that seems most promising.

Finally, teams submit their reports, which include analyses of export profitability, a list of potential buyers in the target country, and a list of government export support programs.

In the days before the Internet, students had to gather information on export markets by going to the library and referring to hard copy sources. Today, our students use online resources, such as subscription-based databases and U.S. and United Nations trade datasets, to target foreign import markets, identify competitors, and develop business relationships with foreign buyers.

Teams can earn even better grades if they succeed in selling products to buyers. Past Export Odyssey teams have exported parachute cloth, manufactured by Performance Textiles, to a buyer in Poland; premium wines, produced by Noni Bacca Winery, to a retailer in Australia; and yarn, manufactured by family-owned J.A. King & Company, to a textile manufacturer in India.

Over the years, we have identified several successful strategies that other faculty should consider if they are interested in starting similar courses at their universities:

**Encourage students to target SMEs.** SMEs have accounted for more than 95 percent of the firms chosen by Export Odyssey student teams over the past three decades. One reason SMEs make good partners for students for these projects is that they might be more likely than larger firms to be seeking export guidance, which means they might also be more willing to collaborate with student teams.

**“Nest” project deliverables.** That is, make sure that the output of one deliverable provides input to a subsequent deliverable. In this way, students can more clearly establish export marketing strategies from several different perspectives, as well as ensure their recommendations align with their partner firms’ existing strategies.

**Embed a business librarian in class as research consultant.** If the university has a business librarian, he or she can lead hands-on, active learning research workshops in class as students reach each project milestone. For Export Odyssey, university librarian Steven Cramer advises student teams on problems and opportunities specific to their chosen firms and foreign markets; he also recommends data sources that the professor might not be aware of yet.

Even if a business school doesn’t have a designated business librarian, almost all academic libraries have official liaisons to each academic department. The librarian assigned to business could be asked to support a course.

Each year, instructors tell student teams to contact four to five companies at the start of the project, so that if one company turns down or fails to respond to their initial queries, they still will get a “yes.” Over the last ten years, students have worked with 150 manufacturers, some of which have returned for research on additional markets.

We’ve found that Export Odyssey helps students learn skills in areas such as sales, negotiation, data analysis, and cultural understanding. The course also serves the school by increasing the value of its graduates and strengthening ties to its local business community.

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*Economics. Steven Cramer is the business and geography librarian at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and co-teaches Export Odyssey with Bahadir. Nicholas Williamson is a retired associate professor of marketing, entrepreneurship, hospitality and tourism from the Bryan School. Williamson and Cramer have co-authored a textbook, Export Odyssey, available from Kendall Hunt Publishing Company. The textbook incorporates the insights gathered over three decades of teaching the Export Odyssey course.*